

[Early and Lillie Holbrook]

November 28, 1938

Early and Lillie Holbrook,(white)

Jonesville, N.C.

Tenant Farmers, Mill Workers, Laborers

Mrs. Clalee Dunnagan, Yadkinville, N.C.

Claude V. Dunnagan, reviser

EARLY AND LILLIE HOLBROOK C9 - N.C. Box 1- 1 1

The girl and her mother were silent as they sat by the door of the squalid cabin. Below them, in the middle of a flat stretch of bottom land, the waters of the sluggish Yadkin flowed, winding its [scrawling?] sprawling course down the valley bed till it was lost in the haze of a typical river bottom fog. The sun had sunk behind the hills and the heat of the August day was slowly giving way to a chilling coolness that drifted up from the misty bottoms. The older woman squirmed in her chair and fumbled for a can of snuff. She took the lid off and filled her lower lip. Then she sighed and relaxed again. The younger girl was motionless / as she listened to the noiser noise that come up form the river... the incessant croaks of frogs and the far-off bay of dogs in the hills beyond the river. through the open door of the cabin came the sound of a nasal snore. Night comes early in the hills. The woman spit out a stream of Juice and dragged her sleeve across her mouth. Presently she truned turned to the girl.

"It ain't that I'd be a-tryin' to butt in your affairs, Lillie," she said apologetically, "but bein' your mother I reckon gives me a right to say somethin' when it don't look like you're doin'

Library of Congress

just what you ort to.” She paused a moment as if to see what effect her words had. The girl continued to stare across the river bottom. The woman continured continued.

“It ain't every day that a poor girl like you gets a chance to marry a rich man like Mr. Carlton. Just because he's older'n you don't make a lot o' difference. He loves you more'n you think and he'll treat you good, too. You'll never have to suffer like me and your pa did...for lack o' money. That's why four o' my least 2 “uns died... no money to pay a doctor. You been through part of it...you know what it is not to have enough to eat or enough clothes to wear. 'Course I ain't blamin' Caleb for it. He done his best. We just didn't have nothin' to start with...and never had nothin' since. It don't need to be that way with you. You got a chance to be happy...have anything you want. Carlton'll give it to you if you marry him...”

“He's been awful good to me,” the girl said without moving. “But I don't love him...can't ever. Not a old man like him...”

“You're young and pretty Lillie, and I ain't aimin' to see you do somethin' that'll make you miserable the rest of your life. It ain't that I'm thinking' o' me and Caleb and the rest o' the young'uns. Carlton can help us if he wants to...said he would if you'd marry him...but that ain't none of my business. It's you I'm thinkin' of...you an' your happiness.. And this is your chance. You got to take it, Lillie, you got to take it.”

The girl sat silently for a minute, then turned half way around in her chair.

“You just said I was [?] young and pretty, Ma. I reckon that's why I can't marry no old man... even if he's got all the money in the world. It ain't natural. I got to marry somebody like me, somebody young...somebody I can love. Don't you see Ma. I woun'dn't never be happy with him...his money ain't everything.... It's got to be more'n that...”

The woman sighed.

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I hate to hear you talk like that, child. I just reckon you ain't old enough to know. Your pa'll be awful mad when he hears you talk like that. He was hopin' you'd done told Carlton you'd marry him.

3

It'll hurt 'im bad..."

"There ain't no other way, I guess. The girl said, and turned again toward the misty hills. The older woman pulled a ragged shawl around her shoulders and stared toward the river bottom.

"The mist's risin'," she said slowly. "I reckon we better be goin' in 'fore we catch a cold...seems like it's gettin' colder, too... comin' in now, Lillie?"

"Yes, Ma. I'm comin!"

"Shut up!" Caleb Luffman banged his fist on the dinner table.

"You been havin' your way for eighteen year, but I ain't goin' to stand by an'see no young'un o' mine throw away a chance to marry somebody that's worth somethin' on account of some fool notion about him bein' too old. Old or not, he's good enough for you, and he's got enough money to keep you from sufferin' like me an' your ma did." He gave out of breath and sank into a chair. "This is one time you can't have your way, child. You got to listen to me...I know what's best for you... You got to marry Carlton..." He paused a moment and caught his breath. He's asked you, ain't he?"

"Yes, Lillie replied quietly.

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"Then, next time you see him, tell him yes. If you don't I ain't got no more use for you...you'll have to get out..." He picked up his hat and went out. As he slammed the door, Lillie turned to her mother.

"He didn't mean it, did he Ma?"

"It's hard to say, child," she sighed. "He's awful stubborn sometimes, you know." She sat down beside Lillie. "Don't worry too much...you ain't lookin so pert nowadays, Lillie. Seems like you don't laugh so much as you used to. I want you to be happy." She paused a moment, then stood up. "I'm goin' over to Nellie's now. We got a lot of washin' to do this week. I'll be back 'fore dark." She gathered up a bundle of clothes and went out the door. When she had disappeared over the hill, Lillie turned quickly and moved toward a chest of drawers in the corner of the room. Pulling out one of the drawers, she threw a pile of clothes on the bed and began sorting them. Then she pulled a worn suitcase from under the bed and threw [?] the clothes into it. There were some vanity effects on the shelf near the washstand. She picked these up and dropped them into the bag. Snapping the grip shut, she hurriedly combed her hair and put on her hat, pausing a moment before a cracked mirror to make sure it was straight. As she looked into the mirror, she heard a noise behind her. She whirled around. It was Carlton, standing in the doorway.

"Lillie!" he said, coming in. "You ain't goin' away....?"

She turned to him slowly.

"Yes...I got to..."

" you You mean... we ain't goin' to gget married....?"

"It's the only way...you got to see it. You been awful good to me...too good. I just reckon I ain't worth it. We couldn't never be happy." She picked up her bag. "I'm leavin' now for Winston. I heard they're wantin' hands [?] at the factory..." She started for the door...

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stopped ... she kissed Carlton quickly, then ran out the door. As she reached the top of the knoll, she heard the far off wail of a train whistle. She would have to hurry. The station was a mile away.

Lillie was unhappy. Many people who come from the hills to Winston to work in the mills are unhappy at first. Some are unhappy always. Lillie wouldn't be unhappy long. She had been to a mill that 5 day, and the foreman said there would be work next week." Six dollars a month for an upstairs room! With cockroaches. There were cockroaches at home, but not that big. Lillie moved to the window and look down. People, more people getting rained on by cold, gray rain. Where are they going? Maybe hunting jobs. Maybe they had jobs ... all of them. She would have a job next week. The foreman said so. She sat down on the bed. She was tired and hungry. The dinner bell would be ringing soon for another boarding house meal. The bed squeaked worse than the one at home. Who would be sleeping on her bed now? Maybe Ma and one of the kids. They would [?] get her card today telling them not to worry. The dinner bell rang. Cron Corn , Potatoes, coffee, men and women. Hard looking women and grimy men. They all worked in the hosiery mill. They ate silently. When Lillie got up, she saw the men staring at her. One of them said something and laughed softly. Lillie couldn't tell what he said. Maybe they were getting fresh. She was good looking. The boys back home said so.

There was a good show up town, Flaming Youth, and there was nothing to do till next week. There were seven dollars left, and the landlady would wait for her next payment...

The mill was running full time and Lillie was in the knitting department at twelve dollars a week. The foreman came around every hour. He said: "You've got to work faster if you keep your job." Lilliw Lillie wound her spindles till her arms were numb, but she was getting faster. If she could wind more she might tet get fourteen dollars a week. The other workers

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were silent ... like the machines. The foreman said, "Don't talk...Just wind." Sometimes she felt like fainting, but she mustn't. She had to reach the quota...and fourteen dollars a week.

Tonight there was a anew a new face at the table. A man. He was young and didn't look bad. Lillie spoke to him about the mill. Yes, he worked there too, in the carding room. He was very nice. Nicer than the other man at the table. He didn't stare at her legs.

"I'm from the mountains. I ran away from home."

"Why? The mountains are pretty...this time of year."

"My folks wanted me to marry a rich old man. I couldn't. They got mad and I left."

"Rich men are scarce. You'd [?] ought to married him."

"I'm young. I'm going to marry a young man."

It was true. They married in less than a week. His name was Early Holbrook. They moved to another boarding house where they could be private. It was nice, coming home from the mill together, eating together, going to the show together, sleeping... There was a little stream behind the house with rocks and moss, like in a fairy tale. It was such a good place to rest and love when your arms are sore from winding spindles and carding. There was a funny little bird always singing after dark ... maybe a whippoorwill, or thrush. They always sang after dark in the reeds by the river at home. It had been two months now. Early was worried that night.

"They're layin' off hands this week, Lillie, We might lose our jobs. Maybe not, but I'm afraid."

The night was too fine to worry. The water sounded like soft wind blowing.

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Early was right. The last envelope said so. No work till further notice. It was all so quick.

7

"We'll have to get a cheaper place, Lillie, till I got another job. I used to be a carpenter once. Maybe I can get some work in town."

But there was no work in town and the last check was going fast. The room wasn't as nice as the other one...there wasn't a stream behind the house and there were no birds singing...except sparrows, but it was better than nothing, with no job.

One day when Early came home from hunting work, Lillie was lying on the bed. She is weak and pale.

"You're sick, Lillie."

"Not much...it's only a headache...."

"I better get a doctor..."

"No. Wait... not yet. Maybe its because I'm goin' to have a baby. It must be a sign of it."

Early was excited. "This early? Lillie?"

"It'll be a long time yet. They're just pains. I remember Ma used to have them before the little 'uns' was bein' born."

A worried look came over Early's face.

"I got to get a job, quick, I got to get a job..."

There were many small farms in Virginia that needed tending.

The newspapers said so. The landlords needed tenants.

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"We can farm awhile and maybe get enough money to buy our own land, Lillie. It don't take long if you work hard." Early said one night.

"I'd like to," Lillie said. "It'll be a nice place to bring up the babies."

"We'll go when I get paid next week."

In Virginia the air was fine and clear, especially in the hills, but for the farm renter, the ground was hard; also the landlords landlord. The tools which the landlord give Early had been used before. They [?] [are?] 8 rusty and worn. He would do the best he could for half the crops. The house was small, with three rooms and no porch. It was a log house. The barn needed some repairing. Early would do it as soon as he plowed the land. It seemed there was more work than one man could do, but Lillie was willing to help... she could work right up till her baby came, and again after it [?] was born. Why, Ma never took out over four days from work whenever she had a baby.

Winter came swiftly. The baby was born... a girl. She looked Like Lillie. It is several days before they could tell what color her hair will be. It was gold, what little there was...like the strands of sunset that filter from the brushy hills on a clear evening. She would be a pretty girl like Lillie. Early was proud of her. He would work harder still so the they could own their land soon. The child was named Lillian, after its mother.

Than the blooming of Mountain Laurel and [Whedodendron?]. The mountains were pretty like in a story book. It was time to plant... corn, tobacco, vegetables. There would be money in the fall and plenty to eat. Early was in the fields at daybreak, with Lillie often by his side and the baby nearby. Lillie watched it every minute while she was hoeing. It couldn't yet walk... it was still too young. She would be walking in a few months for there would be plenty of food...good food, and money to pay a doctor, if he was needed. Oh, little Lillian would be healthy and beautiful, like Lillie.

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With fall, came the busy harvest season. Early and Lillie gathered in the tobacco, strung it, and put it in the barn. In three days it was cured into a beautiful gold, and then put in the cellar of the house until the market opened. The corn was cut and stacked into neat shocks in the field. It would make good feed for the hogs when 9 winter came...what was not traded for flour at the roller mill. The day before tobacco market opened Early said to Lillie:

"I'll have to hire a wagon, Lillie. It's the only way to get the tobacco to market."

"The old man down the road has two wagons. Maybe he will."

"I'll go see him tonight, so we'll be on the floor early tomorrow. I hope the prices are good."

But they were not. There was too much tobacco...the buyers had found out...and the prices were very low, even on the best grades. Early got a little over two hundred dollars. When he got home, the landlord was there, waiting for his money ... half of it. As Early counted out one hundred and five dollars the landlord said, "it's bad it didn't bring no more...it done better last year..." Early was silent as he handed him the money. When the landlord had the money in his hand, he says: "Looks like you coulda raised a little more with the tools you had...and the rich / land..." He paused a moment as he put the money in his wallet. "I reckon [?] you'll be here another season." Early turned toward the house where Lillie was waiting on the porch with the baby.

"I don't know."

At the supper table next night, Early had made up his mind.

"I paid the store bill, today, Lillie. It was more'n I expected I got rid o' the other debts, too. There ain't but twenty dollars left.

"We can't live till next crop on that...."

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"I know we can't. That's whay why we're goin' back to North Carolina."

Lillie stop stopped feeding the baby. "When?"

"As soon as I can sell the furniture.... we'll get what we can out of it."

"Where we going? not back to the mill?"

10

"I got folks in High Point.... We'll go there. Maybe there's work in the furniture factory there.... I used to be a carpenter, I reckon I [?] ougha get a job pretty easy, even if it don't pay much."

Early's folks were glad to see him, though they would be crowded. But he could stay there until he got a job and could find another place. The Holbrooks were mill workers and laborers, too, so Early and Lillie felt at home the first few weeks. The air was not so clear as it was in the Virginia hills, nor quiet. One saw and smelled smoke all the time....in the sections where the workers lived....where Early and Lillie and their little baby lived. It was from the huge and many smoke stacks of the factories. There was noise, too, because many railroad tracks lead to the factories, and the cars seemed to run right through your backyard, making all the noise they want to. Sometimes Lillie couldn't keep from jumping when she heard a shrill whistle blow from over near the tracks, but she was soon used [to?] it, just like she became used to the silence of the Virginia hills. You hardly noticed the change but the noise doesn't seem to bother you [any?] longer.

Early got a job in the factory...running a saw. It was not easy, but he was sure of eleven dollars a week. That would feed and [?] clothe little Lillian (who had been walking quite awhile now) and help pay some of the bills at the house. They had decided not to move since they could pay some of the expenses. And they bought another bed, for Lillie was

Library of Congress

going to have another baby. Sometimes she could feel it moving in her stomach...it was growing...and she was happy. It didn't hurt yet, but it would [wouldn't?] matter when it did. She would have another baby, and that is what she wanted.

Early was without work when the second baby was born. It was 11 another girl. A few days after it was born, it seemed as if it was going to be as pretty as little Lillian, but its hair would not be quite so golden. One night when Lillie was nursing the youngest, Early came in and sat down on the bed.

"We can't stay here much longer...." he said, staring at the floor. "I hear they won't be hirein' any hands for a long time...they're layin' 'em off. I guess we better be lookin' for another place to stay."

Lillie put the baby to bed and buttoned her dress.

"I reckon maybe we could go back to Jonseville...if we have to. It'll be hard facin' them again, though."

"Maybe there'll be work there. If I could just get a job.....just make enough to live on and not have to live on somebody else....I guess we better tell the folks we'll be leavin' this week."

"I reckon it's best." Lillie was staring out the window across the empty railroad yards. The many, large windows of the factory were not shining with blue light. They were dark because they were not running at night anymore. They seemed like huge dead monsters. The moon was gone and it began to rain.

"I reckon it's best", Lillie repeated.

Yes, the landlord would let Early live in the house until the first of the month, but then he will have to pay the rent promptly.....seven dollars, and every month after that. But he could do it, because he had a job now, doing carpenter work, and he would make

Library of Congress

more than enough to pay the / landlord his seven dollars a month. Some rich people over in Elkin were building several small houses to rent to the mill, people who worked in the blanket factory across the river, and Early had a job helping them. It would last several weeks and maybe give them a chance to get on their feet. They had already bought some furniture 12 on the installment plan with the little money they brought from High Point. It wouldn't cost much to furnish the house, though, because they were not using the two upstairs rooms.

"I'm getting older." Lillie said to herself one day, when she looked in the mirror. It was true. There were lines there which were not there when she was in Virginia. Her face looked tired. And sometimes she seemed to feel tired quicker than before, as if the work she was doing was too much for her. But it did not seem so, because all the people she knew worked hard and had lines on their faces. It didn't seem right to have wrinkles on your face when you were not yet thirty. She had seen women who wear fur coats and jewels who didn't look over twenty-five but she know they were almost forty. And they worked hard, too. Why didn't they even leave their children at home and work hard all day delivering baskets of food and clothes to poor people? They drove cars but it wasn't easy work, visiting helping all the poor folks in town. Especially during Christmas. Why those women across the river worked awful hard then. But they didn't get wrinkled and old so quick as people like her. Lillie didn't know what to think about it. It just seemed like you can't figure out things like that.

While Lillie was sitting looking in the mirror, Early came in from work. He was tired and his hands were calloused from working all day, but there were no groceries in the house. He would have to go to the store before supper.

"We got to have some flour and potatoes." Lillie said. "How much money have you got?"

"All I made since I been workin'. Eighteen dollars. I got paid today." Early was staring across the darkening hills. There was something on his face that was not happiness.

Library of Congress

Lillie put the mirror down and turned toward him.

13

"How come they paid you today?"

"They're done with the houses... 'cept the paintin', and I heard they ain't goin' to paint 'em any time soon. All the carpenters was laid off."

"I didn't reckon they'd/ be done so soon." Lillie said.

"I don't reckon none of us did. We 'lowed it'd be another week or two, but the foreman give us our checks this morning and said that'd be all. It don't seem like the houses are half [?], but some folks're movin' in."

"Then they all through?" Lillie said mechanically.

".....all through." he echoed.

"We got to have some flour and potatoes, and maybe a little fatback. I reckon you better build a fire while I go over at Annie's and get the young'uns. We'll have supper when you get back."

She pulled a shawl over her shoulders and went out.

He turned from the window and, cramming the stove with paper and bark chips lit the fire and went out.

Lillie was back quickly with the children. She was going in the door before Early had disappeared over the top of the hill on his way to the store. The fire he started was burning too rapidly. Lillie rushed over and shut off the draft. Little Lillian sat down at the table and began to beat her plate with a spoon. The baby was crawling around on the floor. As Lillie put a kettle of water on the stove, she seem seemed to feel an unusual heat in the room.

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The stove was not burning too much now...the draft was off. Then, from upstairs, there came a peculiar noise that sounded like wind blowing through a dry forest. There was no one up there...the rooms were empty. Lillie turned from the stove and ran up the steps. She flung the door open. Oh god! The flames seemed 14 to leap out at her and fill her throat with scorching heat. The hot smoke rolled out in black waves. The whole side of the wall [?] was covered with the licking flames. With a scream, Lillie slammed the door and ran down the steps. The children! The children! She grabbed the little one in one arm and grabbed the other's hand as she rushed out into the yard. It was dark and the flames had been seen by the neighbors. They were rushing toward the house from everywhere. Lillie sunk to the ground crying, with the two children clinging [?] to her, too fascinated by the bright red glare of the cracking fire to cry. The shouts of the men were heard over the roar of the fire.

"Come on! We can save somethin' on the first floor!".... Don't git too close to that chimney! She's 'bout to fall!"

A dresser came out quickly and then some chairs. The men started in again but it was too late....the heat was glaring on their sweating faces. They couldn't go in again. "Keep away, fellers! It's fixin' to cave in!" The crackling rose to a deafening roar. The line of spectators dropppd back hurriedly as the corner of the house began to sink. There was a shattering crash as the whole side of the house smashed to the ground in a spray of sparks and lapping flames, and in a moment, the whole structure, enveloped in the fire, buckled and sank to the earth in an inferno. It was completely leveled now, and there was nothing left that could be recognized as furniture. As the flames died, the crowd dwindled. It was very exciting, and it had been a good while since a house burned in Jonesville.

Lillie felt someone touch her shoulder. It is her father.

"Bring the young'uns and come on over to the house. I reckon we can make room..." She raised herself from the ground and picked up the baby. The flames are dead. They are

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crying now. Her father carried 15 Lillian and they moved across the hill toward home...by the river.

"It don't seem right, Ma, that God'd send this on us...and when it hurts most...it just don't seem right."

"The Lord knows best, child. It ain't for us to complain.... He does things that humans don't understand, but it'll work out somehow."

There was silence in the little cabin. The children were asleep.

Lillie's father was sitting by the open fireplace opposite Early who was staring at the floor with his chin resting on his hand. He turned to Lillie.

"I hear they're buildin' a new factory near Greensboro, and they'll be needin' carpenters. One of the truck drivers over at the mill heard about it when he was down there last week. I reckon it'll be a good place to get some work maybe...."

"It don't seem like there's any more work here" Lillie said. "We might as well go, I reckon...." She saw her father lean forward and spit into the fire.

"If you don't go," he said slowly, "you can stay here till you get another place. "Course we ain't got any too much room...or victuals, but I reckon we can share what we got." There was a pause...." And it ain't right to let the little'uns suffer too much..."

Early straightened up in his chair.

"It's a steady job I want...just a job that'll last...then the little'uns won't suffer none...not as long as I can work."

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Lillian reached forward and thrown threw a stick of wood on the dying fire....just like she had done years ago. It seemed so natural to reach forward and throw a stick of wood in the same olf fireplace, see the shadows filcker on the same wall.....

16

"So I guess we'll go to Greensboro tomorrow." Early said without moving his eyes from the fire. " It seems the only thing to do."

It was a few moments before something pleasant happened to Lillie. She did not yet know it. Sitting before the fire in her Greensboro cottage, she was thinking of the strange, happy, and unhappy things that have happened to her and Early during four hard, yet somehow pleasing, years in the Terra Cotta mill section of Greenboro. Four years, and now there were five children. Little Lillian had grown up to where she must be scolded for seeing too many boys, and Anne, the second, was taking after Lillian. But there were more than four years on Lillie's face. Hunger, cold, sickness, and strange mill women who attracted Early too much had put lines in her face. Many nights of lonely waiting with the children while Early [was?] out somewhere...afraid to think too much about what he might be doing. It had started...his nights away from home...some / times time after the last child had been born. That was why it seemed strange to Lillie, that Early, who had always loved [?] the children so much, should find an interest elsewhere was unfathomable to Lillie. She had worked hard for him...not that he hadn't done the same for her...but she didn't want appreciation for that...she merely wanted the usual affection from her husband for her and the little ones...though it may have cooled some...and naturally so...since those pleasant days they had been together so much of the time in the Virginia hills. And even now, he was making only enough money to barely feed and clothe the children, much less spend any of it on strange women, as she was sure he had been doing frequently. Gossip travels

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quickly even in a mechanized mill 17 village. It had merely increased Early's indifference and antagonism toward those who criticised him.

As Lillie pondered over these things, there was a knock at the door. She answered it. It was a postoffice messenger with a registered letter. She signed for it and shut the door. Tearing the flap off, she opened it and began to read slowly. Carlton was dead. In his will he had made Lillie a beneficiary to a share of the land he owned. The plot of land, hardly more than five acres, was situated near Jonesville on the bank of the river...not far from home. A pang of sorrow passed through her as she thought of Carlton...he had never meant much to her...thought of his lonely life and all his wealth and [noone?] to share it with. Then she quickly forgot that Carlton was dead.

She realized with feeling of joy that the thing she and Early had wished so much for...even before they left the mill in Winston to go to Virginia...that they could own their own land, without paying rent, was now a reality. When the children came in, she told them about the letter. They were eager to leave the [?] mill settlement. and go to the hills.

Early was home for supper and the effect of the letter on him was that what Lillie had hoped for and expected.

"It says we'll have to be in town next week to file a claim with the lawyers. They're others sharin' in the land too."

"Then, we'll leave day after tomorrow," Early said. "There'll be time to sell the furniture and pack. It ain't no use tryin' to haul everything up there, when we can buy [again?] just as well."

At the lawyers' office in Jonesville Lillie found more people than she expected. They were relatives who were contesting the validity of the will. They said that the old man had no right to will land to a 18 stanger when it was rightly the property of his nearest relatives. Lillie had to hire a lawyer and buy the time the [?] will was settled, the lawyer's fee was big

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enough to automatically confiscate more than half the land she won. What was left was enough to live on, she thought.

Early immediately purchased enough lumber to build a small two-room house...it would be sufficient until he could get out some crops and make an addition. In the meantime Lillie was carrying another child. The doctor told her not to do any hard work until after it was born. This was hard to do. She had always been used to working right on up till the last minute.

When the child came, the crops were in for the year. Tobacco prices were low, and there was a surplus of corn at the [roll?] mills. Besides, his corn was river bottom corn and worth less. He kept most of it and fed it to the pigs.

19

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Thus time absorbed five more barren years, barren except for the suppressed joy Lillie nursed in her bosom for the growing [children?]. There were eight. One had died. This too had paid tribute to time's passage, had etched it its memorial on Lillie's face, on her whole body. Early too was growing older. He was beginning to carry the features of age that Lillie remembered marked her father when she was growing into womanhood back home. He was dead now, buried beside her mother in the little plot behind the church overlooking the river. Their passing had not been a reality to Lillie, merely the sadder part of a strange dream that Time, the subtle sedative, had quickly obscured in the pages of the past. Now it was she and Early who had taken their places, and their places in turn were being slowly filled by the children. It seemed natural to Lillie that it should be that way, though for what human reason, or due to what unknown force, she had never found any occasion to consider.

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Then one day Early decided it was impossible to live longer under the conditions that, year after year, bound him to the soil of the river bottom, to a narrow piece of land that never produced enough to assure them of any security from one season to the next.

I hear they're goin' to do a lot of buildin' in Greensboro this year. It seems like I can make more by goin' there than tryin' to dig a livin' out of a piece of land that ain't big enough to graze a cow on. It's been five years now, and we don't seem to be doin' no better'n 20 20 we done before we come here."

Lillie pled with him that maybe next year crops would be better and bring higher prices, that another year might enable them to buy another small strip of land to add to what they had..

"It won't be no better," he said, "they'll be worse, if anything. There ain't no livin' in farmin' when you ain't got enough land to raise a decent crop on. And you can't anything share croppin'. We couldn't do it in Virginia and we can't do it here. No, I reckon I'll go and see what I can do. I'll send you some money for the young'uns as I get it. It can't be no worse than now."

And he had gone, before Lillie realized what had happened. She was left alone with the children and the bare hope that Early might make enough to live on and send a little home. What he sent home would be all there would be. And if he didn't, there would be none, nothing at all.

When Lillie was at home with her parents years before, her little brother, Joe, had been almost a child to her, not a / brother. He had / looked to her when his mother could not attend to him. He had gradually slipped from Lille's Lillie's mind in the passing years, except once, when he married, and when a few subsequent cards came telling of the children as they were born. Now his wife was dead, he was without work, and the small one room house was / mortgaged to pay for the funeral expenses. It was Lille Lillie to

Library of Congress

whom he turned, Sister Lillie, whose husband had a farm and income, small though it was.

Early had been gone less than a week when Joe brought his three children and moved in with Lillie and the children. He could help about the farm till Early came back, if he did. If not, he would put out a crop next year. Two weeks later, Lillie received a letter from Early. It contained three dollars and a note telling about the work he was doing, working on a new house in Greensboro at twelve dollars a week. He would send more next week.

Thus it was that the weeks went by, Lillie receiving each week three or four dollars from Early, and writing in turn a brief note thanking him and telling him about the children. Lillian was in high school now and little Anne would be next year. The other children were growing fast, too, though it seemed strange since they hardly had enough food for all of them, including Joe's family. Joe earned a little, only a few dollars occasionally, which he usually spent for food and clothes for the children, but often for liquor. Sometimes Early's notes would be critical of Joe bringing his children to live with his own increasing the burden on his wife, but Lillie would always appease him with, "After all, he's my own brother, and besides, he won't be here long, He'll be gettin' regular work soon."

The came / winter, and an epidemic of colds that spread throughout the whole household. First it was Joe's youngest, then Lillie's youngest. Lillie kept them in bed together with many blankets in an attempt to sweat it out. It was not until they called a doctor that Lillie found out Joe's child had a serious case of measles.

"“You'd better move his children out of the house till they're well.” the doctor said, “measles are dangerous in a child like that.”

Joe took his children to a little shanty near the river, and when his youngest one died, moved to a little town up in the mountains. He never came back to Lillie's

Library of Congress

In the meantime, Lillie's youngest child was getting worse. The doctor came and went many times. It took all she got from Early 22 22 to pay him. Then one night the doctor looked at the child and turned to her. "I've done all I can do, all anyone can do." He went away. the The baby died early the next morning, or maybe before, but it didn't begin to get stiff till dawn. It was so pretty to Lillie as it lay there on the straw tick, still and white, so pretty that Lillie did not want to send it away the next morning. They/ would put it beside the other little one, the one that was born dead, in the graveyard where Ma and Pa were sleeping.

Early came home for the burying. It didn't seem just right to put it in the ground without letting him see it once more. They put it in a small wooden box and some of the neighbors helped carry it to the cemetery. Long after they had finished praying and singing, and after the neighbors had gone, Early and Lillie stood alone beside the grave and gazed across the flat river bottom, to the dim hills. The hills seemed so real, so friendly, yet so utterly unmoved that they were almost like gods that sat silently while their will was worked, inscrutably, yet with visible certainty.

"The mist's rising." Lillie said suddenly. We'd better be gettin' home. It's gettin' colder."

"Yes, it's gettin' colder." Early replied as they turned up the path toward home.

Early went back to Greensboro. Before he left, he said to Lillie "It ain't that I'd be wantin' to hold a grudge against anybody. I don't guess it's right, Lillie," he paused a moment before finishing, "but it wouldn't have happened if Joe hadn't came with his young 'uns. It's hard to believe it was God's will. Now I got to go back. It'll be hard, knowin' that the little 'un I used to ride on my knee won't 23 23 be here whenever I came back, won't ever be here. It don't seem real."

Library of Congress

He went away, for there were more houses to be built in Greensboro, and Early was a good carpenter. As long as people built houses and needed good carpenters, Early would have a job, even though they didn't pay him what he thought he ought to have. He would take what he could get, he had always done that.

During this time, Lillian had grown into one of the prettiest girls on the hills. Some said she was even prettier than a lot of the rich girls that lived in town across the river. Lillie was proud of her. She would soon be finishing high school. Lillie allowed her to get a permanent wave once. It was a great sacrifice for her, but it was worth it. Lillian seemed to appreciate it. She kept her hair tied at night, and every day it seemed to flow in natural, golden curls. She kept her dresses clean and neatly pressed, though they were inexpensive. She wore her clothes well and acquired a poise that was the envy of the neighborhood girls. Her figure was that of a more mature woman, though not over plump, and had an eloquence that was disturbing to her masculine schoolmates.

Lillie did not always know who Lillian went out with. Her admirers were many and their calls were frequent. She could not expect her daughter to bring her friends into the squalor of her home. Consequently she was not too inquisitive as to her destination when she left at night with a boy-friend. Lillie knew one of her daughter's frequent visitors was Jud Nelson, a shy youth of twenty who had an old roadster which he would always make backfire every time he came to see Lillian. She seemed to look forward to his coming more than that of any of the other boys. Lillian and Jud would go for a ride up the mountain and then to a show or maybe 24 24 to a little roadside inn to dance to the music of an old electric organ.

The night Lillie saw that Lillian was pregnant, she took her daughter's hand in her own and looked into her eyes.

"How come you didn't tell me?" Lillian could not answer. She was sobbing. "Who was it child, just tell me who..."

Library of Congress

"Jud," she blurted out and fell to crying again.

"How long.../"

"It was.... back in the summertime...."

"Stop cryin'", Lillie said, "you ain't got nothin' to worry about."

When Lillie saw Jud on the street the next day, she called him aside.

"Lillian's goin' to have a baby. You knew it, didn't you?"

Jud dropped his eyes.

"She told me about it," Lillie continued, "I reckon you're aimin' to marry her?"

"Yeah, I was aimin' to ll all along. I wanted to get a regular job first."

"That don't make no difference now. She's goin' to have a baby soon, and it's got to have a father!"

Lillian and Jud were married the nexr next day at the magistrate's house. Jud said they could live at his father's house in the country till he got a job and could find another place. The baby was born two months later, a girl.

The next month Lillie failed to get a letter from Early as usual. Perhaps he was waiting till next week, but another week passed, still no letter came. Lillie was getting worried and 25 25 desperate. There was no money to buy food for the children and Martin, up at the corner store, was beginning to cut off creditors. Lillie found that she could make a little money each week helping Old Annie wash clothes. Every Monday and Tuesday she went across the hill to Annie's house. Ma [used?] to help Annie wash. They washed outdoors where Annie kept three big pots boiling. Some days it was so cold that Lillie thought her

Library of Congress

hands would freeze and fall off. Even as the days got colder, she continued to work, for it meant enough money to buy the childres children some milk and meat, and occasionally an new sweater or a pair of shoes. then Then one day Annie said that she wouldn't be needing Lillie any longer. The folks in town were beginning to send their clothes to the new laundry, and there was not enough work for two people. Annie was sorry, but she couldn't afford to pay for help when she wasn't making anything herself.

Paul, Lillie's oldest boy, was in the sixth grade. Lillie took him out of school and made him help her around the house. They could plant some potatoes and tomatoes in the garden, and maybe raise a little tobacco. But raising tobacco was a man's job and by the middle of summer, Lillie found herself completely worn out and unable to work in the field. Paul did the best he could with the crops, but there was precious little when they were through.

Lillie had still not heard form Early. She had almost given him up for dead. Or perhaps he had again taken up with some mill woman in Greensboro and decided to forget all about his family. Lillie was too busy with her children to try to locate him, but she still worried and hoped.

The one day a welfare worker came to see Lillie. She had heard of their plight through some of the townspeople. 26 26

"The local office isn't allowed to give you any aid as long as your husband is able to work, Mrs. Holbrook."

"I ain't heard from him in almost a year," Lillie said, "it don't seem like he's doin' his young 'uns much good wherever he is...."

"You'd like to have him come home from Greensboro, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Lillie replied slowly, "but it don't seem like it'll do any good and him without a job."

Library of Congress

"The employment agency has some vacancies for carpenters. I believe we can get him a job if he comes home."

"It's been so long, it might be hard to find him, if he ain't already dead." Lillie said.

"We'll write the Greensboro office." the welfare lady said as she got up, "If he's in Greensboro, I think we can find him."

Early was home a week later. He had been working at odd jobs [?] on houses on Greensboro, but had been making hardly enough to live on, much less enough to send any to Lillie and the children. He was thinner than when Lillie had seen him last.

"I was ashamed to write you, Lillie, all the time knowin' that I'd have to sometime. It was after the little 'un died that I got so I didn't care about life, about anything. Then everything got so bad I couldn't get work, except barely enough to live on. And.." here he dropped his head. His voice seemd to quiver the slight4st. "I couldn't come back and face you without tellin' you what I done down there when I wasn't writin' you. Nothin' meant anyhting after that, except her, till I got t at that letter sayin' you needed me and there was a job waitin' Then I saw what I'd been all the time. She wasn't there when I left, thank God. You can't be too hard on me Lillie. I been half crazy ever since I left here. You ain't 27 27 mad, now I told you, are you, Nellie?"

Lillie put her hand on his.

"I ain't mad, Early. You told me. That's enough, ain't it? Besides, we need you, the young 'uns do. Now you got a job beginning tomorrow that'll give us a chance to start all over. We got to gorget forget everything that's happened. It seems like a bad dream, and dreams don't mean nothin'. We're goin' to be happy, with all the little 'uns growin' up. We're going to live a little now."

"Yes," he said, "we're going to live now."

Library of Congress

The next morning Early put on his working clothes and picked up his tool box. He kissed Lillie as he went out the door.

"I'll be back 'fore dark." he said, "I'm ridin' over with Nichols, goin' to meet him at the corner. We're workin' on the same job."

Lillie handed him his lunch. "Be careful, you know you ain't as strong as you was....."

"Don't worry." he said. " Nothin'll happen. I been pretty lucky this way all along." He waved back as he went over the hill.

Nichols was just driving up as Early got to the corner.

"Right on time," Nichols said as Early put his tools on the back seat and got in front. "Got your lunch?"

"Yeah, everything. I reckon this's goin'to be a pretty good job. Eighteen a week's not bad pay, eh?"

"Mighty glad to get it, " [?] Nichols answered as the car moved down the river hill toward the bridge. At the Jonesville end of the bridge is a sharp curve and at the other end a cross street. As nichols approached the curve he said,

"This old buggy'll coast. I can always get across the bridge without startin' the motor. Sometimes I have to put the brakes on 28 28 at the other end. She'll go, this baby...."

"That's a pretty sharp curve on this end..." Early said quietly

"We'll make it okay." Nichols threw the car out of gear. It gained momentum as it coasted down the hill. As it reached the bottom and neared the bridge, Early said quickly to Nichols.

Library of Congress

"You'd better brake it."

Then the curve was on them. Nichols cut sharply. The [?] tires squealed on the curve but the car finally staightened out on the bridge.

"I reckon you had me scared there for a minute." Earlu Early told Nichols as he grinned.

"Haw haw", Nichols guffawed as he slapped Early on the knee. looking at Early he said, "This buggy ain't topeavy. She can hold the road!"

A car pulled out from the intersection at the end of the bridge.

"Look out!" Early shouted

Nichols spun the sterring steering wheel to the right, but the driver of the other car jammed on his brakes and stopped right in their path. Early saw it coming. Nichols twisted the wheel in vain. It was too late. There was a sickening crash as they plowed into the other car. The driver of the other car screamed, but his scream was drowned by the noise of shattering glass and the screech of twisting steel. Early had the impression of being suddenly lifted away into peaceful blackness where there were no noises, not even the sound of men and women running and shouting. For a split moment he thought he heard Lillie calling, but it was from a balckness blackness that quickly became silent. Early Holbrook was dead, and nichols Nichols lay beside him, crushed and bleeding.

***** 29 29

Lillie is sitting alone before the open door of the cabin, staring across the distant hills beyond the river bottom. Yes, it is the same...where Ma was sitting and gazing twenty years ago. It is home, and the rent is not so high as on the old place since they foreclosed on the mortgage. Lillie is glad to raise the children where she was raised. Anyway, she had given Early a fitting burial, though it had cost her the farm. He would have had it that

Library of Congress

way...no he wouldn't..he was too generous and kind...he would have wanted her to keep it for the children...

There was a sound inside the cabin. It couldn't be the children. They were inside asleep. Lillie turned again toward the dim hills... the strange strong [?] that never moved, never laughed or wept.... Then Lillian was standing beside her...with her two children.

“...You here, child? ...why...?”

Lillian is sobbing.

“I couldn't stand it any longer...he's been drinking again.”

Lillie reached forward.

“Give me the baby... I want to hold him. Bring out another chair and sit down.”

“No, I'm not tired. I want to sleep,” Lillian says. “There'll be room for me and the babies...?”

“Yes, child,” her mother answers. “Always.” Lillian moves inside the cabin with the other child. She does not wake the other children. Lillie continues to sit in her chair by the door, holding the baby in her arms. Presently it is asleep.

She goes inside quietly and puts it on the pallet beside its mother who is already asleep. Then again to her chair by the door. The dogs are baying again. They are hunting in the mountains tonight. The river sends up a soft murmur that is deepened by the incessant 30 croaking of frogs. Fog is gathering in the bottom. It looks like the same fog that rose twenty years ago that night when Ma called her.

“It's getting damp, Ma.” Lillian is standing in the door. Lillie jumps the slightest, half startled.

Library of Congress

"Yes child, it's gettin' chilly."

"You'll catch your death of cold." Lillian speaks softly.

Far below the mist is rising toward the hills. Lillie rises from her chair. The mountains seem higher tonight, as if their tops are touching the sky. Perhaps Early thinks the mountains are higher tonight, too. The moon goes behind a cloud and leaves the landscape in darkness.

"You coming in Ma?"

"Yes child, I'm coming."